

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

One of the frustrating aspects of a fixed publication schedule is that an editorial can be published well after the event to which it refers. At the time of this writing, the wholesale elimination of language programs at State University of New York, Albany has created new concerns about the future of foreign language teaching in this country. The decision of the university's President is, by any standard, radical in scope: three modern language programs (French, Italian, Russian), along with Classics and Theater, will be terminated—or, to use the favored technocratic euphemisms, are currently "suspended" pending full "deactivation." Even before the "phase-out" process is complete, students at SUNY Albany who have not yet declared a major, or who are not currently enrolled in a graduate program, can no longer choose to pursue a degree in these fields of study: as announced on the university's Web site, new admissions were suspended as of 1 October 2010. It is perhaps worthwhile at this stage to recall that the opportunity to study modern languages, classics, and theater has long been considered to be part of a well-rounded liberal education—that is, part of a public university's mission. Regrettably, a major university, a flagship campus located in the state capital, has now set a ruinous precedent: language and other humanities programs are expendable and can be terminated on a whim, with only the flimsiest budgetary rationalizations. A respected institution of higher learning, whose motto is "The World Within Reach," has sent the message that learning about other languages and cultures is less important than, for instance, its golf or tennis program.

While all the humanities programs at SUNY Albany that are slated for the chopping block offer undergraduate degrees, French Studies, a thriving program offering B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees, is the most visible. This became all the more obvious when, in response to the SUNY Albany decision, the *New York Times* produced a "Room for Debate" piece that began with the following rhetorical question: "Do Colleges Need French Departments?" The fact that other programs were also "suspended" was, to put it mildly, deemphasized. From the start, the debate was framed as if the process of managing educational issues at a public university were similar to that of making business decisions at a private-sector company. French was thus presented as a quaint luxury that the university could no longer afford, or as an upscale but currently unprofitable product line that should be discontinued. The notion that access to a liberal education is a public good, not an unnecessary extravagance, is therefore obviously outdated. It should instead be self-evident that the real purpose of universities, much like vocational schools, is simply to train students for jobs. To this end, programs such as French are deemed to be both irrelevant and costly.

The wider problem, now that a precedent of blithely terminating entire programs in the humanities has been set, is that such a short-sighted pattern of thinking could well be applied to many other fields of study once thought to be central to a university's mission. Do universities really need to teach philosophy, for instance? Is it relevant to the acquisition of skills that are necessary for the job market? What about history? What is its market value? Do students gain anything from studying it? How much money could be saved by deactivating the degree program and eliminating the department? As for the time spent studying literature, should it not be the object of a cost-benefit analysis to determine its budgetary viability?

This is not to suggest that financial constraints should not be considered at universities, but that they cannot be simplistically considered in the same way as in the private sector. When access to vital educational fields is not just curtailed, but radically eliminated, the consequences will be felt far beyond the supposedly sheltered domain of the university campus. In an interesting coincidence, during the same period in which the SUNY Albany decision was being widely debated, the Governor of New Jersey announced that he was cancelling a planned train tunnel that would have linked his state to New York City. An important public works project that would have improved transportation (and that would have created jobs) in the most populous metropolitan area in the country was suddenly terminated, due to short-term budgetary considerations. The predictable results will be more traffic problems, more time wasted in daily commutes, and more lost productivity. In another coincidence, meanwhile, a new high-speed rail line began service in China. As for China's universities, they are of course expanding, not retrenching. It is perhaps excessive to extrapolate trends from isolated events in different countries. I will simply note that at SUNY Albany, access to public education has been sharply restricted, while in New Jersey, an opportunity to improve public transportation has been squandered. Such ill-advised cuts to education and infrastructure are no prescription for long-term success. If they constitute precedents that will be more widely followed, the decisions to gut investments in education and infrastructure do not bode well in social or economic terms—but then, is the study of sociology or economics really necessary?

I would like to thank Marie-Christine Koop, Past President of the AATF, for taking the lead in drafting letters of protest against the decision to eliminate humanities programs at SUNY Albany. She will also contribute a related article, which will be published in the April 2011 issue of the *French Review*. In the meantime, more information on this issue is available through the AATF Web site (www.frenchteachers.org).

I am certainly glad that there is other news to announce. In this case, the start of two new rubrics of the *French Review*: *Actualités du monde francophone* and *Lettrismes* (see the Announcements page for details). Designed for shorter texts, these new rubrics will complement the *French Review's* extensive scholarly offerings. Also, we welcome to the editorial team Marion Geiger (California State University, San Marcos), who is now serving as Review Editor for Literary History and Criticism. I would like to thank her predecessor, Hope Christiansen, for her many years of service to the *French Review*.

Edward Ousselin, Editor in Chief